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## Alcimedes 18/5

Reform of the Coroner's system has been bubbling for years. It finally surfaced with the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, where one of the features of this statute was the establishment of a Chief Coroner. Unfortunately, with the much-publicised "*Bonfire of the quangos*" in October 2010, it was stated that the position of Chief Coroner would be one of the 192 public bodies that would meet an untimely death. Although this announcement was subsequently challenged (unsuccessfully) by the Lords, it was declared in March 2011 that the Ministry of Justice's decision will save UK taxpayers £10.9 million by "non-implementation" as well as the annual running costs estimated at £6.6 million.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the bonfire theme, Alcimedes can confirm that the Chief Coroner will not be referred for cremation, as the Government clearly had a "*pecuniary interest*" in his premature demise.

The Oxford academic and lawyer Sir Peter North published his independent, Government-commissioned report into the issue of drink and drug driving in June 2010.<sup>2</sup> On 21st March 2011, the Transport Secretary Philip Hammond responded to the North Report by outlining which of Sir Peter's 51 recommendations would be implemented.<sup>3</sup> Amongst other proposals, Mr Hammond announced the abolition of the "statutory option" for providing a blood or urine sample, the proposal to allow nurses to undertake Section 4 RTA procedures, and a maintenance of the blood alcohol limit at 80 mg/100 ml of blood. The North Report and the BMA (amongst others) had advocated a reduction in the alcohol limit to 50 mg/100 ml of blood but the Government counter-argued that "*the drink-driving problem would be unlikely to be eradicated by lowering the drink-drive limit alone.*"<sup>3, 5, 67</sup> Mr Hammond has also proposed the roll-out of portable evidential breath machines and that the drink-drive rehabilitation scheme will become available again, thereby allowing reduced driving disqualifications for drink drivers. Some of these Government proposals will require primary legislation.

Cannabis remains a highly controversial substance. It is defended by many of its users as being harmless, yet maintains Class B status in the UK under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. One of the criticisms that is often levelled against cannabis is its link with psychosis. A 10-year prospective study from the Netherlands published in the BMJ in March 2011<sup>4</sup> has added further weight to the evidence that cannabis may increase an individual's risk of psychosis. The study considered 1923 individuals aged 14–24 over a 10-year period, and excluded anyone with pre-existing psychosis. The research, which was headed by Professor Jim van Os from Maastricht University, concluded that there was a significant increased risk of psychosis with regular cannabis use, even when account was taken of other illicit drugs, socio-economic factors and other mental health issues. The team also argued that the use of

cannabis preceded the symptoms, rather than the drug being used as a means to control the features of psychosis.

However, a different take on cannabis is offered by a Canadian study that demonstrated the potential benefits to cancer patients when given daily cannabis tablets.<sup>5</sup> This relatively small study of 46 cancer patients used twice-daily capsules of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) vs placebo over an 18 day period, and concluded that THC improved appetite, calorie intake, quality of sleep and relaxation. As each of these issues can pose major challenges in the care of cancer patients, it raises further the possibility of an accepted clinical use for cannabis. However, as with most small scale studies, the authors concluded that larger studies and more research were required.

A BBC study using Freedom of Information requests to the 43 police forces in England and Wales has shown that £770,000 was paid in compensation last year for police dog bites.<sup>6</sup> A breakdown of the figures revealed that 2725 of the recipients were suspects, 196 were police staffs and 155 were members of the public. One single payment was for £49,000, where the over-zealous pooch bit an innocent bystander after it was distracted by noise. Another case, which involved a pensioner tending his allotment, resulted in a man being bitten on the ankle by a wayward German Shepherd: the gentleman was initially offered a bottle of Baileys and a heartfelt apology, but he did not feel this was adequate and is now expecting a payout of £10,000. A pair of Kevlar Wellies may also be on his shopping list.

A Commons Enquiry into the closure of the Forensic Science Service has addressed the issue of quality of service if and when the services are tendered out to private companies.<sup>7</sup> The largest commercial provider, LGC Forensics, submitted a written statement to the Enquiry and declared that there should be no concerns with private companies taking over the FSS's work. Critics have argued that private companies will be driven by profit, which could compromise quality and ultimately affect justice. In his submission to the Inquiry, Professor Peter Gill, an early developer of DNA fingerprinting, has argued that privatisation will remove much of the openness that currently exists with the FSS.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, the Crime Reduction Minister James Brokenshire cited recent advice from ACPO and HMIC stating that the volume of UK forensic work is likely to contract from £170 million (2009) to £110 million by 2015. This announcement came shortly before the FSS confirmed that demand for their services has decreased by an average of 23% to each of its laboratories in the past year due to police budget cuts.<sup>9</sup>

Although post-mortem CT and MRI have been used with varying degrees of success and availability, the autopsy remains the gold standard for establishing the cause of death. One of the

criticisms of minimally invasive autopsies relates to the visualisation of small blood vessels and, in particular, the coronary artery system. However, writing in the *International Journal of Legal Medicine*,<sup>10</sup> a Leicester University team headed by Professor Guy Rutty has developed a new catheterisation technique, using air and standard coronary radio-opaque contrast media, to allow greater visualisation of the coronary vessels. Prof Rutty is optimistic about the potential of his team's research and that it may result in a decrease in autopsy numbers without compromising the doctor's duty to the Coroner. The Leicester group claims that the cause of death can be identified in 80% of cases using their technique.

Research by scientists in Dundee has allowed fingerprints to be recovered from fabrics for the first time. Writing in *Forensic Science International*,<sup>11</sup> Professor David Bremner and colleagues described their pioneering work, which involved placing the fabric in a vacuum container and then coating with a layer of gold and zinc. The effectiveness of this technique (Vacuum metal deposition (VMD)) will depend on whether the print comes from a "good donor" (20% of the population) and the nature of the material. Fabrics with densities of greater than three fibres per millimetre (e.g. nylon and silk) allowed greater recovery of fingerprints. The ridges on the fingerprints that are recovered allows for DNA typing and, hence, DNA fingerprinting and possible identification of the suspect.

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